

CHAPTER 2

The BEAUTIFUL LAUGHING SISTERS— An ARRIVAL STORY

THE BEAUTIFUL LAUGHING SISTERS

"It was hard, but we got used to hard."

One of the best ways to understand the refugee experience is to befriend a family of new arrivals and observe their experiences in our country for the first year. That first year is the hardest. Everything is new and strange, and obstacles appear like the stars appear at dusk, in an uncountable array. This story is about a family I met during their first month in our country. I became their friend and cultural broker and in the process learned a great deal about the refugee experience, and about us Americans.

On a fall day I met Shireen and Meena, who had come to this country from Pakistan. The Kurdish sisters were slender young women with alert expressions. They wore blue jeans and clunky high-heeled shoes. Shireen was taller and bolder, Meena was smaller and more soft-spoken. Their English was limited and heavily accented. (I later learned it was their sixth language after Kurdish, Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Hindi.) They communicated with each other via small quick gestures and eye move-

ments. Although they laughed easily, they watched to see that the other was okay at all times.

Shireen was the youngest and the only one of the six sisters who was eligible for high school. Meena, who was twenty-one, had walked the ten blocks from their apartment to meet Shireen at school on a bitterly cold day. Shireen told the family story. Meena occasionally interrupted her answers with a reminder, an amendment, or laughter.

Shireen was born in Baghdad in 1979, the last of ten children. Their mother, Zeenat, had been a village girl who entered an arranged marriage at fourteen. Although their father had been well educated, Zeenat couldn't read or write in any language. The family was prosperous and "Europeanized," as Shireen put it. She said, "Before our father was in trouble, we lived just like you. Baghdad was a big city. In our group of friends, men and women were treated as equals. Our older sisters went to movies and read foreign newspapers. Our father went to cocktail parties at the embassies."

However, their father had opposed Saddam Hussein, and from the time of Shireen's birth, his life was in danger. After Hussein came to power, terrible things happened to families like theirs. One family of eleven was taken to jail by his security forces and tortured to death. Prisoners were often fed rice mixed with glass so that they would quietly bleed to death in their cells. Girls were raped and impregnated by the security police. Afterward, they were murdered or killed themselves.

It was a hideous time. Schoolteachers tried to get children to betray their parents. One night the police broke into the family's house. They tore up the beds, bookcases, and the kitchen, and they took their Western clothes and tapes. After that night, all of the family except for one married sister made a daring escape into Iran.

Meena said, "It was a long time ago but I can see everything today." There was no legal way to go north, so they walked through Kurdistan at night and slept under bushes in the day. They found a guide who made his living escorting Kurds over the mountains. Twice they crossed rivers near flood stage. Entire families had been swept away by the waters and one of the sisters almost drowned when she fell off her horse. The trails were steep and narrow and another sister fell and broke her leg. Meena was in a bag slung over the guide's horse for three days. She remembered how stiff she felt in the bag, and Shireen remembered screaming, "I want my mama."

This was in the 1980s. While this was happening I was a psychologist building my private practice and a young mother taking my kids to *Sesame Street Live* and Vacation Village on Lake Okoboji. I was dancing to the music of my husband's band, Sour Mash, listening to Van Morrison and Jackson Browne and reading P. D. James and Anne Tyler. Could my life have been happening on the same planet?

The family made it to a refugee camp in Iran. It was a miserable place with smelly tents and almost no supplies. Shireen said this was rough on her older siblings who had led lives of luxury. She and Meena adjusted more quickly. The sisters studied in an Iranian school for refugees.

They endured this makeshift camp for one very bad year. The Iranians insisted that all the women in the camp wear heavy scarves and robes and conform to strict rules. The soldiers in the camp shouted at them if they wore even a little lipstick. Shireen once saw a young girl wearing makeup stopped by a guard who rubbed it off her face. He had put ground glass in the tissue so that her cheeks bled afterward.

They decided to get out of Iran and traveled the only direction they could, east into Pakistan. They walked all the way

with nothing to drink except salty water that made them even thirstier. I asked how long the trip took and Shireen said three days. Meena quickly corrected her: "Ten years."

Once in Pakistan they were settled by a relief agency in a border town called Quetta, where strangers were not welcome. The family lived in a small house with electricity that worked only sporadically. The stress of all the moves broke the family apart. The men left the women and the family has never reunited.

Single women in Quetta couldn't leave home unescorted and the sisters had no men to escort them. Only their mother, Zeenat, dared go out to look for food. As Meena put it, "She took good care of us and now we will take care of her."

The sisters almost never left the hut, but when they did, they wore robes as thick and heavy as black carpets. Meena demonstrated how hard it was to walk in these clothes and how she often fell down. Even properly dressed, they were chased by local men. When they rode the bus to buy vegetables, they were harassed.

Without their heroic mother, they couldn't have survived. For weeks at a time, the family was trapped inside the hut. At night the locals would break their windows with stones and taunt the sisters with threats of rape. Meena interrupted to say that every house in the village but theirs had weapons. Shireen said incredulously, "There were no laws in that place. Guns were laws."

One night some men broke into their hut and took what little money and jewelry they had left. They had been sleeping and woke to see guns flashing around them. The next day they reported the break-in to the police. Shireen said, "The police told us to get our own guns." Meena said, "We were nothing to them. The police slapped and pushed us. We were afraid to provoke them."

During the time they were there, the Pakistanis tested a nuclear bomb nearby and they all got sick. An older sister had seizures from the stress of their lives. Shireen said defiantly, "It was hard, but we got used to hard."

Still, the young women laughed as they told me about the black robes and the men with guns. Their laughter was a complicated mixture of anxiety, embarrassment, and relief that it was over. It was perhaps also an attempt to distance themselves from that time and place.

They'd studied English in the hut and made plans for their future in America or Europe. Shireen said, "I always knew that we would escape that place."

In Quetta the family waited ten years for papers that would allow them to immigrate. Shireen looked at me and said, "I lost my teenage years there—all my teenage years."

Finally, in frustration, the family went on a hunger strike. They told the relief workers they would not eat until they were allowed to leave Quetta. After a few days, the agency paperwork was delivered and the family was permitted to board a train for Islamabad.

In Islamabad they lived in a small apartment with no air conditioning. Every morning they would soak their curtains in water to try to cool their rooms. It was dusty and polluted and they got typhoid fever and heat sickness. They had a year of interviews and waiting before papers arrived that allowed them to leave for America. Still, it was a year of hope. Zeenat picked up cans along the roads to make money. One sister ran a beauty parlor from their home. They all watched American television, studied English, and dreamed of a good future.

Finally they flew to America—Islamabad to Karachi to Amsterdam to New York to St. Louis to Lincoln. Shireen said, "We

came in at night. There were lights spread out over the dark land. Lincoln looked beautiful."

We talked about their adjustment to Lincoln. Five of the sisters had found work. They didn't have enough money though, and they didn't like the cold. Meena needed three root canals and Zeenat had many missing teeth and needed bridge-work, false teeth, everything really. Still, they were enjoying the sense of possibilities unfolding. Shireen put it this way, "In America, we have rights." She pronounced "rights" as if it were a sacred word.

Meena mentioned that traffic here was more orderly and less dangerous than in Pakistan. The girls loved American clothes and makeup. Two of their sisters wanted to design clothes. Another was already learning to do American hairstyles so that she could work in a beauty shop. Meena wanted to be a nurse and Shireen a model or flight attendant. She said, "I have traveled so much against my will. Now I would like to see the world in a good way."

Shireen said that it was scary to go to the high school. Fortunately, her study of English in Pakistan made it easy for her to learn Nebraska English. She liked her teachers but said the American students mostly ignored her, especially when they heard her thick accent.

One boy had accosted her in the hall and asked her, "Do you suck dick?" She hadn't even known what he meant, but she'd asked her teacher to translate. The teacher had encouraged her to report the harassment and she had. "I am through suffering," Shireen said. "If it happens again, I will slap him."

I was struck by the resilience of these sisters. In all the awful places they had been, they'd found ways to survive and even joke about their troubles. These young women used their intelligence

to survive. Had they lived different lives, they would probably have been doctors and astrophysicists. Since they'd been in Lincoln, they'd been happy. Shireen said, "Of course we have problems, but they are easy problems."

I gave the sisters a ride home in my old Honda. They invited me in for tea, but I didn't have time. Instead I wrote out my phone number and told them to call if I could help them in any way.

When I said good-bye, I had no idea how soon and how intensely I would become involved in the lives of this family. Two weeks later Shireen called to ask about an art course advertised on a book of matches. It promised a college degree for thirty-five dollars. I said, "Don't do it." A couple of weeks later she called again. This time she had seen an ad for models. She wondered if she should pay and enter the modeling contest. Again I advised, "Don't do it." I was embarrassed to tell her that we Americans lie to people to make money. Before I hung up, we chatted for a while. I liked her enthusiasm and openness to experience. I asked, "Do you need some help?" She said, "My sisters and I need to learn to drive."

DRIVING LESSONS

I went by the family's rental, a small house on a street of grocery stores, fast-food places, and pawnshops. The house was decorated Goodwill-style with Kurdish touches. The sisters came and went in various stages of dress, all with skin creams on their faces. A big can of cashews and a pot of strong black tea sat on the table. The rooms smelled of garlic, onions, and cooking oil. Later I learned that someone was always cooking something delicious.

I met all the sisters and their mother. Zeenat was short, with

reddish hair and deep worry lines around her eyes. She couldn't speak English, but she smiled broadly. It was amazing how much we could communicate to each other with no language in common. Zeenat could convey a great deal with her dramatic body language. At first she mainly conveyed humor and joy at seeing me. Later, I would sense her deep sorrow.

At fifty-five, Zeenat was lost in America. She'd been left by her husband and she couldn't learn the language or find a job. She had many health problems and a deep persistent depression. Nevertheless, she remained earthy, affectionate, and expressive. She reminded me of strong women, like Thelma Ritter or Bea Arthur, with heart and spunk.

The sisters were all beautiful, smart, and assertive, with straight black hair and flashing black eyes. Their assertiveness and their sticking together was what had kept them alive. All of them loved to laugh, sing, and dance. But all of them were coping with nightmares, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, heart palpitations, and other physical symptoms of stress. Quickly, I learned how different they were from one another.

Nasreen, the oldest sister, was small and slender with a large beauty mark on her cheek. She had been educated in a private school before the family fled Baghdad. She had read feminist and political writers, poetry, and philosophy. There was an aura of sadness about Nasreen that never left, even when she smiled her slow smile. She was a poet in a factory.

Leila, the second oldest, was the tough workhorse, the leader of the family, and the moral authority. She was kindhearted and sensible. She had shopped for the family's first car and she made all the tough calls. Leila kept the family focused and calm.

Tanya had a shiny curtain of hair, a curvaceous body, and languid moves. Men were crazy about her. She often had a

bouquet of roses on the table from some Back Door Johnny or other. But she seemed indifferent to these admirers, resigned to their attentions rather than pleased by them. Tanya was about as un-Nebraskan as a woman could be. She was intuitive and dramatic and spoke with her eyes and her body. Later I learned she was the family comedian and mimic. She was beautiful and sensual and could have been a great actress. But she was a lonely person, too, set apart by her strengths, too sensitive for the hard life she'd led, and isolated from American peers by her terrible history.

Shehla seemed healthy, both mentally and physically. She was pretty in a girl-next-door way, if the girl next door can be from Kurdistan. She had an eager smile and an easy laugh. She favored jeans and crisp cotton shirts. Shehla had an endearing habit of letting her sisters talk when they could, but jumping in when their English faltered. As time passed, it seemed as if Shehla allowed herself to have more problems. She had generously waited her turn and let her sisters have their problems first. When everyone else was doing better, she allowed herself the luxury of being sick.

Jabha was the second-to-youngest sister. She was fun-loving, sweet-natured, and lighthearted. She had been born during a famous battle and named Jabha, which means "battle," to commemorate that event. However, Jabha was a terrible name for her, so she was nicknamed Meena. Meena always wanted to go everywhere and to do everything. She asked lots of questions and made jokes whenever she could. Her favorite word was "tasty."

Shireen was the baby of the family. She could have been a model if we allowed our models to be size eight and of medium height. Partly because she was in school, she was the quickest to learn English and to understand American ways. She was very

focused on getting a good education. Shireen had a close relationship to her mother and was used to getting star treatment in the family. Even as a new refugee in town, she was poised and confident.

That first day we talked about buying a car. The sisters had only been here for three months and didn't have much money. All had learner's permits. Leila said they had three thousand dollars and wanted to buy a Honda or Toyota.

Later I called a friend who sold used cars. He said he would look for a good deal. I said Jim and I would contribute some money, too. Leila came with us to the car dealer. She wore a scarf and carried a big plastic purse. It was a bitterly cold day and she shivered in the icy Nebraska wind. She test-drove the car and listened as my dealer friend explained the warranty and the car's flaws and virtues. I thought we had a deal, but after I took her home, I got a call. To my surprise, she said in her heavy accent, "I went to the library and the blue book value isn't so good for this car you showed me." I marveled that Leila, in a foreign country, somehow knew to use a blue book.

The sisters eventually bought a car and I began driving lessons with Shehla, Meena, and Shireen. These driving lessons allowed us many quiet hours to talk. After we got through the harrowing first stages of learning to drive with a stick shift, on the right side of the road, and in city traffic, I became their cultural broker for jobs, education, and physical and mental health.

We started out driving on Saturdays, in parking lots and on empty streets. Shireen or Shehla would drive first, then the others. We laughed a lot. I kidded them about my hair getting grayer every time we drove, and we teased Meena, saying she would be a race-car driver because she skidded on the corners. Shireen and Shehla had practiced driving in Pakistan, but Meena

started from scratch. She was nervous when the car jerked, died, and screeched. When Meena finally executed a smooth start, Shireen shouted, "You go, girl."

I noticed that Meena became anxious whenever we passed a speed limit sign. Finally, I asked her what made her upset when she saw these signs. She explained that it was hard to drive the car at exactly the speed limit, not one mile faster or slower. This misconception made me remember a Hungarian woman who thought that at intersections she was supposed to drive right under the red light and stop. Before I figured out what she was thinking, she almost got us killed.

Later the sisters practiced driving at the Department of Motor Vehicles. There were always other immigrants in the parking lot learning to drive in old beat-up cars. I pretended to be the examiner and said officiously, "Young lady, you have done very well." Even such a small joke elicited a laugh.

The sisters wanted to know how I became a psychologist and writer. They didn't understand how the different colleges in our city connected with the GED program. They were desperate to catch up. Meena wanted her GED immediately, but her teacher had urged her to be patient. I said, "Don't worry, Meena, someday you will be president." But she told me, "Only people born in America can be president."

We talked about what psychologists would label post-traumatic stress disorder. The sisters had nightmares and trouble sleeping. They had memories that kept them from concentrating on their schoolwork. Shireen had visited a doctor who gave her sleeping pills. I encouraged them to talk to each other, to write in journals, and to consider seeing counselors. I worried about what we didn't talk about. Today they were stylish young women learning to drive, but I wondered what psychological

damage had been done. What must they forgive in order to be healthy?

Shireen loved learning to swim at school. She passed her lifeguard training and joined the synchronized swim team. She taught her sisters how to swim, and they joined a club so that they could swim regularly. Otherwise, they worked long hours in a factory. In Iraq they had a sister with breast cancer to support and they had to repay their passage from Pakistan.

I wanted to make sure they learned about the good things in our city. Advertisers would direct them to the bars, the malls, and anything that cost money. I told them about what I loved: the parks and prairies, the lakes and sunsets, the sculpture garden, and the free concerts. I lent them books with Georgia O'Keeffe paintings and pictures of our national parks.

For a while I was so involved with the lives of the sisters that Zeenat told me that her daughters were now my daughters. I was touched that she was willing to give her daughters away so that they could advance. I tactfully suggested we could share her daughters, but that she would always be the real mother.

The sisters talked about the differences between the United States and Pakistan. They said even the light was brighter here. I taught them the names of trees and, when spring came, I taught them to identify jonquil, tulip, redbud, cardinal, and finch. One day we passed a goldenrain tree and I said its name. Meena said it could be called the tree of golden tears.

Sometimes I inadvertently frightened them. During the Bush/Gore presidential race, I explained the differences between the two candidates to the sisters. To my puzzlement, they looked increasingly alarmed as I talked. I finally asked, "Are you okay?" Shireen explained that they had been in Iraq and seen the rise of Hussein. Then they were in Pakistan after Benazir Bhutto

lost her election. They'd seen women stoned in the streets. Meena asked, "If Bush is elected, will you be killed?"

They thought ordinary neighborhoods were for rich people. I never showed them the starter castles south of town because I was too embarrassed by our distribution of wealth. What would I say? "This is the home of the factory owner who pays you minimum wage?"

Very soon we all grew to depend on our weekly lessons. They needed my advice and support and I needed their joy at seeing me and their curiosity about the world. Often we talked of their nightmares about being chased or locked up. I was struck by how little they complained and by how eager they were to share everything they had, including stories.

When someone asked the sisters where they were from, they didn't know what to say. Meena laughed as she told me that one time in frustration Tanya said, "We are from Italy."

Whenever I showed up, I was offered food—fresh naan made by Tanya or spinach soup or curried fish. And always there was black tea or juice. Before we drove, the sisters would show me their schoolwork. The older sisters had enrolled in GED classes. Often, they worked overtime and were too tired to study. I felt sad that after losing so much of their lives to refugee camps they were now losing their lives to boring factory work.

I tried to act as a full-time encourager and helper. All the sisters tried out ideas on me—one week Meena asked me if she should join the army. Leila wondered if they could find factory work that didn't involve periodic layoffs.

One day Shireen said that in her human behavior class, they had just watched the movie, *Alive*, the grisly story of survivors of a plane crash. After the film the teacher showed interviews

with the survivors. Shireen found it very upsetting and cried in class. The American students weren't so moved. Another day the sisters watched *Titanic*. They loved the movie but cried and cried. I found that this movie was a favorite of refugees. I suspect it is because it makes tragedy heroic and romantic, instead of merely sad.

IMPERIAL PALACE

One night I took the sisters to my favorite Asian restaurant in Lincoln. I also invited Anna, who is the pretty and sophisticated daughter of a friend of mine and someone I trusted to help the sisters with fashion and young adult activities.

While we waited at our table for Anna, I talked about the sandhill cranes. Every year between Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day, the cranes come to the Platte, hundreds of thousands of them. They sleep at night on the sandbars and feed in the fields along the river by day. Their cries sound like "something you heard before you were born," to quote writer Paul Gruchow, and they fill the air at sunset and sunrise. Some mornings they all lift off the river en masse like a great white cloud rising.

Anna arrived, energetic and friendly. The sisters were a little intimidated by her sophistication and were quieter than usual. They were also overwhelmed by the hundreds of menu items. They were picky eaters and wary of new foods.

We talked of many things, including how Kurdish women remove body hair by roping it with tiny threads and then yanking it out. The sisters asked Anna about her makeup, hair-styles, and clothes. Tanya told us she used to cut hair in Pakistan, but she doubted she could go to school and get the necessary license here.

We talked about dating. Anna was going with a policeman

and that led to the story of the lost purse. One night Shireen left a purse with all the family's money in a park. She was devastated but had the presence of mind to call the police. Fortunately, a kind policeman showed up later with the purse and all her money. We teased Shireen about the cute policeman. Jokes about dating always got big laughs.

Tanya said she had been asked out by a guy who showed up to take her to *The Perfect Storm*. Much to his surprise, everyone in the family wanted to go along. We all laughed at his surprise, but behind the laughter was sadness. All of these women had spent their beautiful youth locked in a hut in Quetta. Now they were out of step with their own people as well as with Americans. They were too sharp for many of the people they met on the job, and they had no money for the places frequented by educated Americans. Besides, not that many doctors, lawyers, or professors married women who worked in factories.

Meanwhile our food arrived, first hot-and-sour soup, then egg rolls and crab rangoon, followed by chicken lo mein, crispy fish, and fried eggplant and tofu. The sisters dutifully tried things; Shehla choked on a hot pepper and had to drink a gallon of water to recover. Meena and Shireen left most of the food on their plates. Some dishes may have been forbidden for religious reasons; some they just didn't like.

Anna offered to take the sisters "garage-saling" sometime, and they readily agreed. They were hungry for new friends. We opened our fortune cookies and laughed at their messages. Shehla would marry a rich man. Leila would soon have good news. Nasreen had a kind heart.

I snapped photos of our group. The sisters kept photo albums and had shown me pictures from their past lives. In the pictures at Imperial Palace we were smiling, with our arms

around each other, the sisters were all dressed up and hopeful about the future, a good moment to capture.

A BAD DAY

At the end of March I arrived for a lesson on driving in snow. Zeenat came to the door, dressed in slippers and a housecoat, friendly as usual. But as we talked I could tell she was discouraged. She had learned a few phrases of English. She said what would become her mantra to me: "I am bored. I want to go back to Islamabad."

I felt for her. Hard as her life had been in the past, at least she had been useful. Now she was home alone most of the time. She cooked and cleaned the house, but she had no money and no friends. She missed the intensely communal life of the past. Shireen said her mother's eyes would light up when she returned from school, but then be sad again when Shireen insisted she must sit down and study.

Today all the family was sick and demoralized by the frigid weather. They spent their days assembling computer boards and pieces of electronic equipment. At best, it was dull work that required care and close attention. At worst, it involved scornful supervisors and toxic chemicals. We talked about other job options and the sisters decided to look, as a group, for a better place to work. Then they would leave this factory en masse.

The sisters were never alone. Partly this was of necessity; they hadn't had the luxury of houses with bedrooms for each person, or of separate vehicles for outings. Partly it was tradition; they came from a part of the world legendary for its female bonding. Women cooked, ate, bathed, danced, and slept together. And partly it was for protection. One of their survival tools had been to stick together.

I learned early that whenever a decision had to be made, whichever sister was involved would say, "I will talk to the family and tell you later." Nobody thought of just going off and doing what she wanted. Always the question was, "What is good for the family?"

That didn't mean there was not tension. At first I just didn't see it. I saw nothing but sharing, taking turns, and being polite. Later I would see that communal living took a toll. Sometimes it was hard to share the phone or car. The sisters had different priorities and needs. There were arguments about decisions. The older sisters were stressed by their responsibilities to the younger ones. Goals were deferred for the good for the group, but not without resentment.

Probably the most significant tension was around the younger sisters' desire to study and the older sisters' desire that they all work and make money to buy a house or a car or to send money to Iraq. Yet no one ever questioned that issues should be resolved in a group process. No one struck out on her own. Most of the time, the sisters took turns getting their needs met. Furthermore, they were best friends who went dancing together and took each other along on dates.

This snowy morning Leila brought me strong medicinal soup of spinach and beans. Perhaps because it was snowy and they were sick, the talk was a bit grim. Shireen was being bullied by an African American girl at school. Shireen made what could be considered a racist generalization and I talked about the stereotypes and media images of blacks in this country. I encouraged Shireen to try to make friends with some of the black kids at her school.

We talked about male-female relations. The sisters worried that Kurdish men expected to be the boss. But they were also leery of American men, who they'd been warned wanted to

have sex right away. Shehla wanted to go see the movie *Girl, Interrupted*. She didn't know what it was about, but she liked the name.

A SPRING DAY

Another day, spring arrived and we drove to the university campus. At the campus fountain I taught the Kurdish sisters to throw pennies and make a wish, which they enjoyed very much. This was about the right level of fun. Elaborate, expensive plans could easily run amok. Small was beautiful.

I explained vocabulary words they'd heard recently. Shehla asked what *sarcastic* meant. I'd used the words *vulnerable* and *intuitive* and they wanted to understand them. After I explained them all, Meena used them in a sentence. "We are intuitive and we have been vulnerable, but we are not sarcastic." Yes, I thought, that is exactly right.

We walked to the sculpture garden. Many statues were scattered in the prairie grasses. They liked a statue of a grief-stricken daughter crying on her father's corpse. We stood a long time in front of a bronze of a buxom woman with big hips and a very small head. Finally Shireen said, "We know what the artist thought was important about women."

STATE FAIR

On a hot July night, I took the family to an outdoor musical. We carried our strawberries, naan, and goat biryani into the field that served as seating for the audience. We spread out a blanket and passed around our meal. Tanya's biryani was simple—meat, rice, onions, and cardamom pods—but incredibly delicious comfort food. Nearby, other families shared Czech runzas and kolaches. Just as the sun set and the lightning bugs appeared, the musical began.

This play helped me see how hard our language was for the sisters. I remembered reading the scene in *The God of Small Things* where the Indian narrator and her family went to the movie, *The Sound of Music*. The narrator misunderstood so much of what was happening on the screen.

The same thing happened to us at this play. *State Fair* was a total conundrum to the family. They couldn't understand the cornball, out-dated language. They didn't know what a state fair was. They had never heard of a "lickin'," a competition for prize pigs, or the game of horseshoes. They clapped at the right times, but they might as well have been watching Kabuki theater.

At one point, when the judge in the play was getting drunk from eating brandy-soaked mincemeat, Shehla asked me if he had eaten some sour pickles and was getting sick. At another point, on the fair midway, women dressed in skimpy, faux Mideastern silk pants and scarves danced erotically to lure men into a striptease show. Tanya beamed proudly to witness such beautiful Kurdish women represented in an American play. I didn't have the heart to tell her they represented the sleaze factor at the state fair.

The sisters left the musical only vaguely aware of what happened to these apron- and overall-clad farmy Iowans. Graciously Zeenat said she liked the pines in the park and Leila admired the full moon.

JULY 4

Zeenat and the sisters arrived at our house with Tanya's famous biryani. They'd bought the meat from an Arab grocer who had killed the lamb that day. It was a typical Fourth in Nebraska, about ninety-five degrees with 90 percent humidity. The air smelled of smoke and gunpowder and Lincoln boomed with a

frenzy of fireworks. It was so noisy outside that we couldn't talk. Firecrackers exploded next door. Dogs barked because their ears hurt.

Leila wore cotton slacks and a simple top, but the other sisters were in fancy holiday summer wear—tank tops, short shorts, and lots of makeup. Shireen had a Madonnaesque outfit with a little porkpie hat. She carried a small American flag. Tanya wore a low-cut black silk top and blue jeans. To the sisters, one meaning of freedom was the freedom to wear American clothes. I reflected that while their clothes were sexy, their intentions were innocent: a night with Jim and me sharing biryani and home-made ice cream, then going to see our city fireworks display.

We walked through my garden looking at flowers. Shehla smelled my wild sage and said it reminded her of the spices that grew wild in the Kurdish mountains. We took photos by the trumpet vines of this new American family in sexy American clothes waving a small American flag.

Later we drove to Holmes Lake for the big city fireworks display. Thousands of people were there, but eventually we settled in below the dam on a patch of grass. We lay down on blankets, so that we were looking at exactly the right piece of sky for the fireworks.

It was a happy time, all of us lying on blankets like sparklers in a box, a breeze came up, the stars came out, and we taught each other the Kurdish and English names for the constellations. Zeenat said this park reminded her of Islamabad, her highest compliment. Shireen waved her flag at passersby.

When the fireworks began to explode, we gasped at their beauty. But between bursts, the sisters said that the fireworks made them think of the bombs over Iraq. Tonight their favorites were the gold ones, the stars, and the ones that looked like golden rain or golden tears. Afterward we held hands as we

walked back toward the car. We were all tired but happy to be celebrating together. On the way home, we drove past a man holding a sign that said HONK IF YOU ARE AN AMERICAN. I said to Jim, "Honk at the guy. We all are Americans." The family clapped. Shireen waved her flag.

CAMPING ON THE PLATTE

On a September afternoon, the sisters, Zeenat, and I drove to a park along the Platte River. We drove past orange milo fields and men harvesting corn. The air smelled like we were inside a giant cereal box. It was a gorgeous day, blue sky, seventy degrees with the ten-foot-tall sunflowers blooming and red sumac and goldenrod in the ditches. It was a football Saturday with a Big Red game in Lincoln so the park was almost empty.

This was an old park with cottonwood trees and sand bottom lakes. We pitched our tents along the Platte. Nearby, coal trains passed on a regular basis. But when they were gone, we could hear birds singing and the gurgle of the Platte. The rustle of cottonwoods was hypnotic. So was watching the Platte meander toward the Missouri, its broad braided channel as slow moving as butterscotch pudding.

The geese were just beginning to move south, and occasionally overhead we would see a ragged V. A blue heron claimed a sandbar and we watched him as we talked. The girls noticed everything—a nuthatch walking down a tree trunk, the rose hips and poison ivy, the flop of a carp, and the dragonflies. Excitedly we planned our day.

Coming into the park, the sisters had seen a sign for horseback riding and they wanted to ride. They hadn't been on horses since their dramatic escape from Iran into Pakistan years earlier and I sensed this ride would be a corrective emotional experience. I agreed we would go tomorrow.

At first we were hot, but as the afternoon wore on and cicadas began to hum, the temperature dropped. Zeenat sat in a lawn chair and watched the Platte's muddy water roll by. Most of Zeenat's childhood had been spent outdoors. She seemed much more at home here than she did in the family's small Lincoln apartment. She rubbed Tanya's head in soothing therapeutic motions, an ancient remedy that went all the way back to the Stone Age. Tanya said it worked quicker than aspirin.

Meena, Shireen, and Shehla went swimming in a sandpit. They said lake water was alive, very different from swimming-pool water. It had layers, cool then warm, and little fish and currents. Meena said, "I wish we could stay here forever."

Shireen located my camera buried in a mound of camping gear. When I congratulated her on finding it, she said proudly, "I have always been good at finding things." Meena hugged me and said, "She found you for us."

Nasreen said the Platte reminded her of the Tigris River that flows through Baghdad. She said, "As a girl I walked along it every day. I read poetry on its banks. It was green, not brown like this, but it moved slowly and peacefully like the Platte."

I said that as a girl I had learned that the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers were the cradle of civilization. The sisters smiled proudly. I asked Nasreen if she read poetry now. She said no, that she couldn't read English. I encouraged her, pointing out that it wasn't too late to go to school. She said, "You haven't seen my credit card bill. I will work forever to pay it off."

I asked Shehla about her studies. She said she had gone to many schools over the years, but the schools were in different languages with different curricula. She said, "I have big gaps in what I know."

The sisters talked about their jobs. It was such tedious work and afterward they felt too tired to study. Leila asked me if my

daughter had a job and I said, "Yes, she works for a nonprofit organization." Leila asked what shift she worked. I answered, "Day shift."

Tanya gestured at the beauty all around us and said, "We have spent our lives locked in little dark rooms. We love to be outdoors."

She spoke of all their journeys and losses and of the great sadness they all carried in their hearts. Shireen told of a lesson in writing class. The students were asked to make a life map, a time line with ten significant events. She said the American kids had no trouble, but she had a terrible time. The Americans listed birthdays, vacations, and maybe their grandparents' deaths. But all of her events were sad—escapes, family members being murdered, and things she couldn't write down because they were too painful to tell. She said, "I didn't do the assignment."

We prepared a beautiful ancient meal. Over the fire, using only sticks and their hands, Leila and Shireen roasted meat, corn, and potatoes. Tanya chopped eggs with some cucumbers and tomatoes. I'd brought a watermelon and an angel food cake baked by the Mennonites who sell cakes at the farmers' market. Zeenat helped me lay out plates and cups of lemonade. I served the watermelon, which Meena declared tasty. We ate under the rustling trees. It was one of the finest meals of my life.

At sunset the sun was a great orange ball with a three-quarters moon rising. We sat by the river and watched the sun go down. The river darkened and the bats came out. Shireen sang an ancient Kurdish song. We allowed our senses to feast on the scene. It is one the oldest of human pleasures, sitting by water with friends, watching the sun go down, and feeling the earth cool. Nasreen quoted a Persian poet writing about water and sunsets as "the place where gold and silver waters blend."

Later we gathered around a fire. Shehla and Nasreen had

prepared strong tea, *chai* in Kurdish, in a silver pot. I taught them to roast marshmallows on our shish kebab sticks. They enjoyed the process more than the results.

Leila said that before the Muslim prophet, Mohammed, the Kurds worshiped fire. We talked about all people's love of fire, about what an ancient experience it was to sit with your friends, full and safe, around a fire, looking at the stars and telling stories. There is no happier experience for us humans.

We fell silent watching the fire, each of us deep in our own thoughts, all of us made calm and reflective by the time and place, by the rituals of food and family. One by one we peeled off and headed for our beds.

The next morning I was up first. I made coffee and then watched as a hundred geese lifted off the Platte. They flew across the pale blue sky toward the delicate pastel sunrise. Gradually one sister after another woke up. We fixed tea and shared a simple breakfast of bread and cheese. Meena said the wind, coming through the cottonwoods, scared them in the night. When a train roared through they wondered if it was a tornado. Slowly and reluctantly we packed up. I was glad we had horseback riding to look forward to. Even so, Leila pretended to cry as we left, and Tanya looked like she could cry.

As we drove to the horse camp, everyone was talking and pointing, eager to ride. The wrangler helped the women onto their horses. The sisters looked nervous but thrilled. Shireen took all their pictures. Meena borrowed a cowboy's hat and we all laughed at her Wild West look. We rode on a well-worn trail along the Platte and under old burr oaks. We rode past a flock of wild turkeys and a meadow of sunflowers. At one point Shireen shouted, "Look at me. I am in Iran. Now I am in Turkey. Now I am in Kurdistan."

The others all pretended they were riding their horses

through the countries they had lived in. Then they had been hunted victims, afraid for their lives. Now they were in Nebraska with new American jobs, clothes, and dreams. In a different century, they would have been mothers in arranged marriages living nomadic lives. I would have been an Irish-woman digging potatoes and cooking with peat. But this afternoon we were in Nebraska. Today we were free, waving to each other and imagined crowds of well-wishers, riding proudly past sunflowers and prairie grass, riding into a future we would share.

HALLOWEEN

The sisters wanted to see trick-or-treaters and carve pumpkins so we had a party at our house. It was good Halloween weather, windy and crisp, with the leaves blowing and branches hitting the houses in spooky ways. When I picked up the sisters, a storm was brewing in the west. It was snowing in the Sandhills, and Omaha had a tornado warning. Shehla was on the porch watching the sky. She ran toward me, shouting that she and Meena had passed their driving tests. Now three of the sisters could drive.

All the sisters came but Shireen, who worked night shifts. Zeenat came, too, eager to get out of the house. At my house Leila and Tanya took charge and happily cleaned and carved three pumpkins and a squash while the others watched admiringly. We put candles in the jack-o'-lanterns and displayed them on our porch. Then we took many Halloween pictures.

We had pizza delivered, but ate a sit-down dinner with candles and flowers. These little adornments were not much work, but they signaled a celebration. We toasted the new driver's licenses. We talked of school. All were discouraged by

the big classes, the hard lessons, and the difficulties in finding time to study. Just coping with America took all their energy.

Tanya said they were exhausted after a day's work and the drive across town in rush hour traffic. Sometimes one of them would be kept late, and since they had only one car, the others would have to wait in the parking lot. Tanya felt demeaned by the work and insulted by the way she was asked to do things. She asked me for help controlling her temper. Nasreen worried about her credit-card bill with its high interest. She sighed. "I work all the time and I can never pay all my bills."

The older sisters had even considered returning to Pakistan or India, but Shireen and Meena wanted to stay in America. I worried about the possibility that the family would split up. Leila said, "Don't worry. We decided to always stick together."

Everyone groaned and laughed at the same time. We moved on to other topics—the quirks of our language, the geography and politics of America. The sisters reminded me of baby birds with open mouths hungry for food, only they had open hearts and minds and they were hungry for information. Their questions never stopped. "What's the name of that flower? What's the best way to drive to work? Is that the generator for your heat and air-conditioning unit? What is the purpose of a Pap smear? When does the Immigration and Naturalization Service send the permanent residency card?" They knew what they didn't know and they knew how to ask questions. This is a set of skills not all newcomers have.

Nasreen was upset by President Bush's bombing of Baghdad during the Gulf War and also by a news story about Kurdish refugees in a boat who had washed up in France. Seeing these incidents on television made them all realize how lucky they were, but also how badly the Kurds had it everywhere.

My friend Jill had baked us a sweet potato pie and the sisters sampled it carefully. Meena pronounced it tasty. She gave me a beautiful card thanking me for helping her learn to drive.

Soon Zeenat and the sisters were dancing Kurdish dances in our living room. They stood side by side, arms behind their backs, moving their hips and feet in a vigorous dance. Tanya then did her imitation of American sexy dancing. I jokingly warned her to not do it in public.

While the others dealt with trick-or-treaters, Meena and I did dishes. We talked about time lines and I made the point that most lives alternate between easy and hard times. Meena looked at me and said with no self-pity, "Never in my life have I had one day that has been easy."

The trick-or-treaters were great fun. The sisters enjoyed every child, admiring each, discussing costumes, and laughing at the remarks the kids made. I hadn't enjoyed a Halloween as much since my kids were young.

I taught the sisters to play bingo. They loved it and happily called out, "Bingo." The prizes were embarrassingly small. I had gathered up the soaps, shampoos, lotions, and even mouthwashes from hotels I had stayed in and I'd put them in a hat. Whoever won a bingo, got her choice. The sisters agonized over their selections. They were excited and grateful for these gifts. I was almost chagrined by their gratitude, but I was having too much fun to be really upset. The evening passed, punctuated by a chorus of "Happy Halloween," "Trick or treat," "Say cheese." "Bingo."

SHIREEN'S ENROLLMENT IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Shireen and I had spent hours touring local campuses, reading catalogs, and filling out forms. The process of deciding on a col-

lege, getting relevant information for enrollment, and getting moneys arranged had been cumbersome. I was struck by how much there is to know about college. For example, whom do you call for information?; how do you arrange a tour?; how do you enroll?; what are the deadlines?; what do you put in the essays?; where, when, and how do you apply for funds?; what is a major?; what are prerequisites?; and how do you read a course schedule?

I am generations deep in family with college degrees. My grandmother graduated from Peru State Teachers College in 1907. My mother was a doctor. I'd attended half a dozen colleges myself, my husband has a Ph.D, and my kids are both college graduates. But what about newcomers working in a foreign language in a system unfamiliar to them in any language? The complexity and strangeness of the system puts up many barriers.

Shireen finally decided on the community college that was cheaper and offered both short-term degrees that led to relatively good jobs and an academic transfer program that led to a college degree. The community college had an adult education program, with a more flexible schedule for factory workers than our universities.

We had turned in her family's tax records and written the scholarship applications. Finally, we were ready to enroll. I picked Shireen up at 6:00 A.M. so that we could be first in line at the 7:00 A.M. registration. She was dressed up college-girl style, with jeans, a sweater, makeup, and big hair. She was excited and nervous, with all her papers in order, we thought.

At the college we stood in long lines. Shireen told me that she had seen the movie *Quills*, about the Marquis de Sade. I grimaced and said I was sorry she'd seen it. She asked what sado-masochism was. I tried to explain the word, but she couldn't quite grasp its meaning. She had never been exposed to anything

like this. I said bluntly that mixing sex and violence was a terrible idea. I reflected on the irony that she was the war victim and refugee and I, the middle-class Nebraskan, was telling her about sadism.

Finally, it was our time to sign up. We found out that the classes Shireen wanted were full. A less-experienced guide would have given up, but I knew how to work the system and how to plead with a dean. Eventually Shireen was enrolled. I paid her fees. Later she would be reimbursed by her Pell Grant and could sign over the check to me. But, again, what happens to newcomers without American friends?

We bought her pencils, notebooks, and books, and she was shocked at the prices. As we walked out of the college and back to my car, Shireen said, "I am the first woman in the history of my nuclear family, in a thousand years of women, to go to college." She was beaming. Yes, I thought to myself, this paperwork and standing in lines has been worth the bother.

HOLIDAY REUNION

During the holidays my children visited and we had a holiday feast for them at the sisters' house with gifts and lots of pictures.

Zeenat met us at the door and hugged Jim and me and our kids. Meena made us chai and we sat in the small living room on the couch that used to be in my therapy office. Nasreen showed us pictures of their sister in Iraq and their home from years ago, before Hussein. Leila asked Jim husband about snow tires for her car. Then we opened gifts. We'd bought them a calendar, wind chimes, origami paper, and a cookbook. Zeenat carried them from person to person for examination. They gave me delicate gold earrings. All the gifts were much admired and appreciated.

Then Tanya and Shehla offered to paint my daughter-in-

law, Jamie, and my daughter, Sara, with henna. This took a while. They painted brown-and-gold fish on their hands. We looked at photos of our happy year together and they told my kids stories of our many trips.

Sara mentioned she had a dream the night before, and the sisters leaped in with dream interpretation. I noted with interest that Freud was not the first to develop symbol systems for dreams. Long ago, the Kurds had one all worked out. Sara had dreamed of a dog, which in the Kurdish system meant "enemy," but at least the dog was small and white. The sisters agreed that women were good luck in dreams and men were symbols of danger. Snake and scorpion dreams were bad luck. Dreams about roads were very important and predicted the future with great accuracy.

Then Shehla read our palms. She told Sara she would have three husbands, all handsome. I was to have two, not a good fortune for me since I was happily married to my first. Jamie would have many healthy babies.

Shireen showed Jim and my son, Zeke, the college essays she had written. Jamie and Sara and I watched as Shehla taught us to make a wonderful Kurdish dessert. It involved filling French crepes with crème, folding them, and then sprinkling them with pistachios. Zeke helped chop cucumbers and tomatoes for salad.

I had brought grapes and pomegranates, and Tanya had fixed her delicious biryani. Leila showed up just as dinner was served. She worked two jobs now and I almost never saw her. She had deep circles under her eyes but, as usual, she was cheerful and energetic.

We took pictures of our families together, of my two tall brown-haired kids and my slim black-haired daughter-in-law with all the dark-eyed sisters, who by now also seemed like my daughters. We took pictures of Shehla with her pistachio treats,

of Tanya with the biryani, of Meena and Shireen acting like supermodels, of Nasreen and Zeenat embracing Sara, and of Zeke and Jamie hugging all the sisters at once.

We sat on the floor and shared the bountiful food. We applauded the chefs. I was happy having my two families together, my old family of Zeke, Sara, Jim, and Jamie and my new Kurdish family. There was lots of laughter and hugging. Today we all seemed like one family, the Kurdish and the Nebraska branches.

POSTSCRIPT

The Kurdish sisters are my friends. My respect for their adaptability has only increased. The sisters are brave, intelligent young women who have good judgment about time, money, and people. They have a thousand ways of being kind to me.

They have strong family loyalty, although that has been tested in Nebraska. In Pakistan the family all had the same dream—to come to America. Here, each sister is developing her own dream and sometimes these individual dreams collide and cause tension and anger in the family. Some members of the family want to move to India or Pakistan; others want to stay here. They all think that it is hard to pay bills in America. They argue about priorities. I think family therapy might be a good idea.

The sisters are examples of refugees whose individual attributes should slate them for success here. However, their jobs pay \$7.15 an hour, not a livable wage. They have a great deal of academic catching up to do and not as many educational resources as they need. They are supporting family back in Iraq and have an enormous bill for their air travel to America. They drive an old clunker, which doesn't necessarily carry them where they need to go. The external environment is creating many barriers to their achievement of American dreams.

Zeenat continues to learn English slowly. She attends a group for Arabic-speaking older adults, and she is loved and cared for by her daughters. And yet she wishes she could return to Islamabad where she was surrounded by women she could talk to and where she held a central place in the family.

I visit the sisters once a week to tutor Shehla in social studies. My husband tutors Meena in math. Sometimes we all go on outings together. They all continue to love to swim. Shireen is at our community college. The sisters are slowly making a few American friends. Nasreen still has sad eyes. Meena continues to find life tasty.

BROWN NEBRASKA

Immigration is a story as old as the Pilgrims and Ellis Island and as new as the Vietnamese families that arrived last week on an airplane. What is really new in 2001 is the changing color of our nation. This century, whites will no longer be a majority. Kenneth Prewitt, director of the Census Bureau in 2000, said that the 2000 census documented a dramatic change and showed that "America is on the way to becoming a microcosm of the entire world." We have 28 million foreign-born residents, or one out of every ten people. One out of every five schoolchildren is foreign-born or has foreign-born parents. Prewitt wrote, "We are literally becoming a country made up of every country in the world." Increasingly, newcomers are being sent to cities in the Midwest and South. For example, Nashville police carry computers that explain the laws, simple requests, and commands in twenty languages. Because they are inexpensive places to live, easy places to find work, and relatively crime-free, towns like Salina, Kansas, and Fargo, North Dakota, are receiving newcomers, and Owatonna, Minnesota, has six hundred Somali refugees.

A turkey-processing plant in a small town in Minnesota was first staffed by Vietnamese and is now staffed by Somalis. A friend told me of a refugee in this plant who asked for her help with a placement test. She was trying to ascertain what he knew and wrote down a few simple math problems such as 4×2 . He took her paper and wrote out a long calculus equation. He'd been an engineer in Africa for years and now was pulling out turkey guts.

Refugees and immigrants are often hidden in plain sight. Most Nebraskans aren't aware how much our population has changed. They drive down a street, see the same trees and buildings and don't realize how different the people are.

Some locals say, "We just want to be left alone." However, with 6 billion people on the planet, many of them in desperate circumstances, nobody gets to be left alone. The Dalai Lama made this point when discussing Tibet. He said, "The history of the last years shows that no place is so remote and small that it is safe from outsiders."

Environmental catastrophes, wars, and political upheavals have displaced people all over the world. According to the official World Refugee Survey 2001 of the United States Committee for Refugees, there were 14.5 million refugees and asylum seekers and more than 20 million internally displaced people at the end of 2000. Anthony Marsella in *Amidst Peril and Pain* wrote, "From a humanitarian perspective, the current international refugee problem is unparalleled in size, scope, and consequence in human history."

Many refugees arrive recently traumatized and with tragic backgrounds. Some have literally just been lifted out of a holocaust. About 40 percent of our refugees have been tortured. Many have witnessed genocide and seen family members killed. Others have been made to participate in acts of torture or mur-

der. Many come from camps in which they were beaten or raped. The word *detained* is a terrible euphemism for what has happened to them.

People who have been in refugee camps for years have lost any sense of control over their lives. They have had years to learn helplessness, years without useful work, education, or meaningful decisions. Some have internalized a sense that they are nobody, chaff in the wind.

Refugees are sometimes portrayed as helpless victims, but the truly helpless victims don't make it here. Generally, it takes work, intelligence, patience, charm, and luck to be selected as a refugee. Arrival stories are survivor stories. However, after the victory of safe passage, years of hard work follow. And in their own way, the challenges of the United States can be as rough as the challenges of Sudan or Afghanistan.

ARRIVAL STORIES

Most of the refugees who arrive in Lincoln didn't choose to come to our city. They were handed a plane ticket to Lincoln by INS officials when they got off a plane in New York or Los Angeles. They may know nothing about the Midwest and they may have been separated from their closest friends by the assignment process. They may have bodies adapted to tropical climates or skills such as deep-sea fishing that they cannot use in the Midwest. They may be moving into a town where no one speaks their language or even knows where their country is.

Most newcomers arrive broke. In fact, I have never met a rich refugee. All arrive worried about jobs and housing, as well as about their legal status in the United States. Especially if they have been tortured or lost family members, they are not at peak mental efficiency. In many cases, refugees don't speak English and have never lived in a developed country. They have been

warned not to trust strangers, yet everyone is a stranger. They have no way to sort out whether people are kind and helpful or psychopaths. All of us look alike to them. They fear robbers, harassment, getting lost, or being hit by a car.

Here in Lincoln, most refugees are met at the airport by people from their homeland and by someone from church services. An interesting thing happens at the airports. When the newcomers and their hosts meet, they all burst into tears. The moment of arrival has an intensity and poignancy that sweeps everyone away.

From the airport, refugees are driven to a furnished apartment stocked with food and used furniture. Their first day in town they get their social security cards and their immunizations. They enroll their kids in school, and, if needed, they receive emergency doctors' appointments. Sometimes refugees get off the plane with life-threatening illnesses and go directly to a hospital.

Each adult is given fifty dollars per week, plus food, rent, and temporary medical insurance. They go through an orientation that explains everything from how to use the city bus and library to marriage laws and taxes. Adults are encouraged to get jobs quickly. The goal of our resettlement agencies is self-sufficiency in four months. In fact, within a few weeks, refugees are often working. In addition to their other financial burdens, all refugees must repay their airfares from the country they fled.

A woman from Kazakhstan arrived in Lincoln with her father. She waited three hours at the airport for her sponsor who was at a party and had forgotten her. Later that night her father had a heart attack from the stress of the journey. From television, she knew she could call 911. Yet even when the translation service finally kicked in, she could give no address. Amazingly, her father lived through this attack.

Zainab arrived at JFK Airport in New York City. Before arriving she and her husband had spent years in a camp in the Saudi Arabian desert. They had two children in the camp and Zainab was again pregnant. She walked off the plane, looked at all the electric lights and the people who were walking fast and talking loudly, and she said to her husband, "Let's go back to the camp. At least there we had friends and family." He said, "I don't own the plane. I don't own anything."

Telling me this later, Zainab laughed. She said, "All he had was money for a Pepsi, so he bought me one. Drinking that cheered me up."

Zainab and her husband had hoped they would be assigned Lincoln, where they knew a few families, but an official sent them to Fargo, North Dakota. They boarded another plane and arrived in Fargo late at night. They were picked up and taken to a hotel room. Too tired to clean up or eat, they fell into deep sleep. In the morning they awoke and looked out the window. They saw green trees, grass, a squirrel, and two dogs. Zainab said, "We had spent years in a place with no plants or animals. My husband asked me if we were in heaven."

They had never seen people in shorts or with dyed green hair. They didn't know how to use a phone. A homeless guy gave them thirty-five cents and dialed for them.

Soon they managed to move to Lincoln. Zainab had trouble with our foods. In Iraq there were not many kinds of vegetables, mostly just tomatoes and cucumbers, but they were fresh and delicious. Zainab said Nebraskans had a huge variety, but nothing tasted flavorful.

Zainab came from an area where men and women did not touch each other except in families. The American handshake was a problem. When a man held out his hand to her, she had

to explain that Iraqi women do not shake hands. She learned to hug American women and say, "Hug your husband for me."

FIRST BIG SHOCKS

When I was in college, I remember reading about a tribe in Central America who thought that Americans never got sick or died. All the Americans they'd seen were healthy anthropologists, tall and well-nourished. They'd never seen Americans die.

Modern refugees often come here equally naive about us. Some have Nebraska and Alaska confused and expect mountains, ice, and grizzlies. Some think of Nebraska as a western state with cowboys, and they are ill-prepared for our factories, suburbs, and shopping malls. Many newcomers have never seen stairs, let alone escalators or elevators. Inventions such as duct tape, clothes hangers, aluminum foil, or microwaves often befuddle new arrivals.

Someone once said, "Every day in a foreign country is like final exam week." It's a good metaphor. Everything is a test, whether of one's knowledge of the language, the culture, or of the layout of the city. Politics, laws, and personal boundaries are different. Relations between parents and children, the genders, and the social classes are structured differently here. The simplest task—buying a bottle of orange juice or finding medicine for a headache—can take hours and require every conceivable skill.

Some refugees believe they will be given a new car and a house when they arrive. Some people ask government workers, "Where is my color TV? My free computer?" Others have seen *Dallas* or *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* and think they will soon get rich.

This belief that it's easy to get rich in America is exploited by con artists. An Azerbaijani man received a Reader's Digest Sweepstakes notice informing him he was a millionaire. He fell

to his knees and thanked Allah for his riches. A Vietnamese family called relatives in Ho Chi Minh City to tell them the great news that they had won the Publisher's Clearinghouse sweepstakes. A Siberian couple laughed and danced around their kitchen, already spending their expected pickle card winnings on a new car, a dishwasher, and a swimming pool for the kids. Later, when it became clear they hadn't won, they weren't so happy.

Some newcomers don't know the number of weeks in a year or what the seasons are. Others are well-educated but have gaps. Once when I was talking to a well-educated Croatian woman about our history, I brought up the sixties. I said, "It was a hard time with war and so many assassinations, those of John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King." She asked in amazement, "You mean Martin Luther King is dead?" When I said yes, she began to cry.

Our casual ways of dealing with the opposite sex are without precedent in some cultures. Our relaxed interactions between men and women can be alarming to some people from the Middle East. Some traditional women are suspicious of American women; it seems to them as if the American women are trying to steal their husbands because they speak to them at work or in stores.

An Iraqi high school student told of arriving in this country on a summer day. As she and her father drove through Lincoln, there were many women on the streets in shorts and tank tops. Her father kept saying to her, "Cover your eyes; cover your eyes." Neither of them had ever seen women in public without head covering.

There are two common refugee beliefs about America—one is that it is sin city; the other is that it is paradise. I met a Cuban mother whose sixteen-year-old daughter got pregnant in Nebraska. She blamed herself for bringing the girl to our sinful

town, weeping as she told me the story. And she showed me a picture of the daughter, all dressed in white. A Mexican father told me that his oldest son was now in a gang. He talked about American movies and the violent television, music, and video games. He said, "My son wears a black T-shirt he bought at a concert. It has dripping red letters that read, 'More Fucking Blood.'" He looked at me quizzically. "America is the best country in the world, the richest and the freest. Why do you make things like this for children?"

On the other hand, some refugees idealize our country. They talk endlessly of the mountains of food in buffets, the endless supply of clean water, the shining cars, and the electricity. Flying into a city such as New York or Seattle, many refugees experience their first vision of America and are overwhelmed by the shining stars of light on the ground, more light than they have ever seen. One refugee from Romania captured both ideas when he said, "America is the beauty and the beast."

When I ask refugees what America means to them, many say, "Freedom." This may mean many things. To the Kurdish sisters it is the freedom to wear stylish American clothes and walk about freely. It's the freedom to go swimming and shopping and make a living. To many of the poor and disenfranchised, it is the radical message that everyone has rights, even though at first many refugees do not know what their rights are.

America means a system of laws, a house, a job, and a school for every child. In America people can strive for happiness, not even a concept in some parts of the world. They are free to become whomever they want to become. Refugees learn they can speak their minds, write, and travel. They shed the constraints of more traditional cultures. As one Bulgarian woman put it to me, "In America, the wives do not have to get up and make the husbands' breakfasts."

People from all over the world want to come here. They want a chance at the American dream. They come because they want to survive and be safe and anywhere is better than where they were. However, the process of adjusting is incredibly traumatic. The Kurdish sisters were in culture shock for about six months. After a year, they are still deeply in debt, lonely, haunted by the past, and struggling to master our language and our culture. They are overwhelmed every time their bills arrive. Nasreen and Zeenat still dream nightly of their homeland.

It is difficult to describe or even imagine the challenges of getting started in a new country. Imagine yourself dropped in downtown Rio de Janeiro or Khartoum with no money, no friends, and no understanding of how that culture works. Imagine you have six months to learn the language and everything you need to know to support your family. Of course, that isn't a fair comparison because you know that the earth is round, what a bank is, and how to drive a car. And you have most likely not been tortured or seen family members killed within the last few months.

Picture yourself dropped in the Sudanese grasslands with no tools or knowledge about how to survive and no ways to communicate with the locals or ask for advice. Imagine yourself wondering where the clean water is, where and what food is, and what you should do about the bites on your feet, and your sunburn, and the lion stalking you. Unless a kind and generous Sudanese takes you in and helps you adjust, you would be a goner.